

THE FIRST MAYOR OF NEW YORK CITY,
THOMAS WILLETT.

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[REPRINTED FROM THE MAGAZINE OF AMERICAN HISTORY FOR MARCH, 1887.]

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THE FIRST MAYOR OF NEW YORK CITY

THOMAS WILLETT

It is somewhat singular that the first mayor of New York city was a resident of Plymouth Colony through his whole active life, was one of the "Assistants" in the government of that colony at the time of the English conquest of New Netherland, and now lies buried in a secluded corner of the State of Rhode Island.

Thomas Willett makes his first appearance on the historic stage in the narrative of Governor William Bradford, of Plymouth, in the year 1629. He was then about nineteen years old. The Plymouth colonists had joined with other parties in the establishment of trading-houses, for traffic with the Indians along the coast of Maine, at Kennebec and Penobscot. Not being quite satisfied with their agent there, named Ashley, they joined with him an "honest young man that came from Leyden—which young man being discreet, and one in whom they could trust, they so instructed him as kept Ashley in some good measure within bounds," * This young man was Thomas Willett.

He is commonly thought to have belonged to one of the families that took refuge in Holland from ecclesiastical persecution in England, and to have come over with the last of the Leyden company in 1629. His supposed connection with an eminent clergyman of the Church of England will be mentioned in a special note. All we know of his earlier life is, that he became well versed in the language and customs of Holland, and that, appearing on our shores in 1629, he bore a good name, and commanded confidence, notwithstanding his youth. For about ten years he appears to have divided his time between these trading-posts on the shores of Maine and his home in Plymouth. He was admitted freeman of Plymouth Colony in 1633. In 1635 a French fleet, under D'Aulnay, broke up his station at Penobscot, and drove him away; † he returned to Plymouth by way of Boston. In 1636 he married Mary, daughter of John Brown, a prominent man in Plymouth. There his children were born.

Winthrop records the following under the year 1639, but without assigning any date to the interesting incident: "At Kennebeck, the Indians wanted food, and there being store in the Plymouth trading-house, they

* *Bradford's History*, p. 260.

† *Idem*, p. 332.

conspired to kill the English there for their provision; and some Indians coming into the house, Mr. Willett, the master of the house, being reading in the Bible, his countenance was more solemn than at other times, so as he did not look cheerfully upon them, as he was wont to do; whereupon they went out and told their fellows that their purpose was discovered. They asked them how it could be. The others told them that they knew it by Mr. Willett's countenance, and that he had discovered it by a book that he was reading. Whereupon they gave over their design." *

This anecdote, preserved by Winthrop, gives us our latest glimpse of Willett as living among the trading-posts on the shores of Maine. Meanwhile, he had a home in Plymouth, where he resided most of the time from the last-named date till the year 1660. He became a ship-owner, and engaged in trade with the Dutch settlement at the mouth of the Hudson. According to Dr. Stiles, "he was a merchant, and had factories or Indian trading-houses from Kennebec to Delaware, particularly at New Amsterdam and Fort Orange." † He continued his special interest in the eastern traffic, and appears as one of the "farmers" or lessees of the same. As late as 1655 he joined with Governors Bradford and Prentice in a seven years' lease of trade on the Kennebec; the rate to be thirty-five pounds a year, payable in money, moose, or beaver. ‡ He held various appointments which attest the confidence of his fellow-citizens, and rendered valuable service to the "old colony" and town. In 1647-48 he was appointed captain of the military company, and he bore that title ever after. He was one of the Assistants in the government of the Plymouth Colony, by annual election, from 1651 till 1665, at which time he was on public duty in New York. His name is often on record in connection with wills and the settlement of estates. Governor Bradford, the leading man of Plymouth, when near his death, in 1657, confided the management of his property to Willett and two others, with very ample discretionary powers. A few months later he was arbitrator between Plymouth and Rhode Island in regard to the ownership of Hog Island, in Narragansett Bay. He appears never to have served as one of the Commissioners of the United Colonies of New England, but at the annual election in Plymouth, in three successive years, he was "next in nomination," *i. e.*, I suppose was chosen as substitute.

The New England colonies and the Dutch settlements at New Netherland were in frequent collision. They were rivals in trade; their bounda-

* *Winthrop's Journal*, Hartford, 1790, p. 194. † *Holmes' Annals*, I., 339.

‡ *Plymouth Records*, III., 95.

ries were ill-defined and sometimes overlapped; the parent countries were in a state of intermittent warfare, and difficulties arose from conflict of individual interests and the escape of fugitives. In 1650, Peter Stuyvesant, the last Dutch Director of New Netherland, held a conference with the Commissioners of the United Colonies at Hartford. The object was to settle these mutual misunderstandings. Some diplomatic fencing had to take place. It was agreed that if the commissioners would forbear calling Hartford "in New England," Stuyvesant would not date his letters "in Connecticut in New Netherland."

It was at length determined "that all differences should be referred to two delegates from each side, who should prepare satisfactory articles of agreement." Curiously, both parties chose Englishmen for arbitrators. The New England Commissioners named Bradstreet of Massachusetts and Prentice of Plymouth, while Stuyvesant selected Captain Thomas Willett and George Baxter, who had been his "English Secretary." This title of Baxter suggests one reason for the choice of these two men, viz., the value of a knowledge of both languages, Dutch and English, in these negotiations. To this knowledge Willett added a good reputation for fairness and integrity. The arbitrators assigned most of Long Island to the English, and marked out a boundary line on the mainland, reserving to the Dutch certain lands at Hartford, already occupied by them. The appointment of two referees on the Dutch side who were of English descent was naturally resented by Stuyvesant's countrymen in New Amsterdam. They complained that the Director had surrendered more territory than might have formed fifty colonies. The award did not stand long.*

Before the end of this year we find Willett in Plymouth again. A Jesuit missionary from Quebec, who had been laboring among the Indians on the Kennebec, and whose name was Druilletes, visited Boston and Plymouth. His object was to establish better relations between the French in Canada and the New England colonies, and if possible to gain aid from the latter against the threatening Mohawks. He was hospitably treated. He wrote in his journal, at Plymouth: "The governor of the place, by name John Brentford" (Wm. Bradford), "received me with courtesy, and appointed the next day for audience; and then invited me to a fish-dinner, which he ordered on my account, knowing that it was Friday. I met with

* Later in the same year, Willett, then at New Amsterdam, bought at auction a ship which had been fitted out to carry colonists to settle Staten Island, and which Stuyvesant in one of his feuds with his countrymen had arbitrarily confiscated. She was named *New Netherland's Fortune*. Willett employed her in trade with Virginia and Holland.—Brodhead, *History of New York*, I., 518 *et seq.*, 524.

much favor at this settlement, for the *farmers*, and among others Captain Thomas Willets, spoke to the governor for the good of my negotiations." This was in December, 1650.*

In 1654, England being at war with the Netherlands, the Protector, Cromwell, sent an expedition to operate against the Dutch on the Hudson, to be re-enforced from the New England colonies. Plymouth directed Willett to join the Commissioners of the United Colonies, and "to accompany them unto the Manhatoes, and to be assistant unto them in advice and council." The force to be sent from England was so delayed that before its arrival, after a long voyage, peace had been made. Roger Williams, who was then in England, and who gratefully remembered the kindness he had received from the Dutch in New Amsterdam, at his first return to his native land in 1643, has the credit of having aided in securing this auspicious delay. In February, 1659-60, Captain Willett first appears on the town records of Rehoboth, in the western part of Plymouth Colony, which then included the present area of several towns. Its southernmost part bore the Indian name of Wanamoisett, and here we next find Willett established, in what afterward became the town of Swansey. He bought land from the Indians, in connection with other leading men of Plymouth. In 1661, under authority from the colony of Plymouth and the town of Rehoboth, he bought from Wamsutta, son of Massasoit, the large tract called Rehoboth North Purchase, which included the present towns of Attleborough and Cumberland. Five years later he conveyed these lands to the authorities of the colony, by whom they were granted to the inhabitants of Rehoboth.

There are many indications that he gained the confidence of the sachems, and was useful as mediator between them and the whites. When, in 1662, Wamsutta was summoned to Plymouth on suspicion of hostile conspiracy, Willett was appointed to request his attendance; and after the chief had been surprised he gave as reason why he came not to the court before, that "he waited for Captain Willett's return from the Dutch, being desirous to speak with him first." And in December, 1664, when he had become a conspicuous man in New York, the town of Rehoboth voted to allow the "sum which Capt. Willet agreed to give Philip for growing corn in the Neck, and that Capt. Willet should agree with Philip for the year ensuing." †

* For an account of the visit of Druilletes, see Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America*, p. 323 *et seq.* But this extract from his journal I found in W. S. Russell's *Pilgrim Memorials*, 1855, p. 197.

† *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, XII., 16, 162, etc.

About the same time at which he became a resident of Rehoboth, Willett took share in a purchase of land on the western shore of Narragansett Bay, at Namcook or Boston Neck. He is not mentioned among the original shareholders in the Atherton purchase, which was made in the early summer of 1659, but his name (Captain Willett of Rehoboth) occurs in a list of proprietors in the Atherton company, dated October 13, 1660.* He became the owner of large tracts of land in the Narragansett country, which he left by will to his grandchildren. His son-in-law, John Saffin, represented the interest of the family in disputes that arose, and a portion of this property is still owned by the heirs of Willett's descendant, the late Willet Carpenter, Esq.

It is quite possible that, in removing from the seaport of Plymouth to land watered by a tributary of Narragansett Bay, Willett had it in view to look after his purchase on the shore of that bay. He appears, a few years after this, to have had some sort of residence in New Amsterdam; John Winthrop of Connecticut addresses a letter to Thomas Willett "of New Amsterdam," in July, 1663.

In 1664, the English conquest converted New Amsterdam into New York. In time of peace, and in violation of previous charters, Charles II. made a grant to his brother, Duke of York, which included all New Netherland and part of Connecticut. A fleet was sent to enforce the claims of the duke, and demand the surrender of the Dutch plantation. It was commanded by Nicolls, with whom three commissioners were joined. After reaching Boston, Nicolls wrote to Willett, asking him to meet the commissioners at the west end of Long Island. What followed is well known. The grim but impotent defiance of Stuyvesant, vowing that he will be carried out dead before he will surrender, stamping his wooden leg, and tearing up the letter which contained the moderate terms offered by the commissioners, makes a strong historic figure, which even the genius of Irving cannot render wholly ridiculous. Nicolls relied much on the advice of Willett, whom he found "more acquainted with the manners and customs of the Dutch than any Englishman in the country," and who acted with "discreet friendship" toward both parties. Willett, with Winthrop of Connecticut and a few other New Englanders, met Stuyvesant and his advisers in New Amsterdam, and offered favorable conditions on behalf of the commissioners. On September 8, 1664, the surrender took place, and New Amsterdam became New York city. Two days after, Nicolls sent one of his colleagues, Cartwright, up the Hudson, to secure and occupy the Dutch posts there, and to make friends with the Indians.

* *Proceedings Massachusetts Historical Society*, November, 1885.

Nicolls requested some persons who had experience with the savages to accompany this expedition. One of these was Willett. He was thus present at the birth of Albany. His prudence in this expedition won the praise of Cartwright.*

By the following winter Willett had returned to his home in Rehoboth, and one of Nicolls' colleagues, Carr, visited him there, on his way to Boston, in January. He remained with Willett several days, obtained leave of absence for him from the Plymouth governor, and persuaded him to assist in remodeling the city government in New York, as he was more acceptable to both Dutch and English than any other person. In June, 1665, the forms of city government and names of offices were changed. Thomas Willett became mayor, assisted by five aldermen, three Dutchmen and two Englishmen, and a sheriff. The appointment was made by Nicolls, who was deputed by the duke to be Governor of his Province of New York. It was probably renewed by the same authority in 1666. The most prophetic sagacity could not then have foretold the magnificent growth of New York city. It consisted of a few narrow streets south of Wall Street, and of small thatched cottages, with some handsome buildings covered with Dutch tiles. But it already had a cosmopolitan character, as eighteen languages were spoken within its limits. The office of mayor called not for uncommon executive ability, but rather for aptness at conciliation, and a knowledge of men, especially of Dutchmen, their customs and language. The only spoken utterance of Willett that I have met with belongs to this period of his life. It shows that he could express himself in epigrammatic English. Of Nicholas Bayard, Stuyvesant's nephew, and Clerk of the Common Council, he said, "He is never in the way, nor ever out of the way."† Incomparable clerk!

In 1668 Governor Lovelace succeeded Nicolls, and Willett became a member of his council. On the temporary repossession of New York by the Dutch, in 1673, the property of all the Duke of York's officers and agents, Willett's included, was confiscated and put in the hands of commissioners. But he had quit that province, never to return. He came back to his home in Wanamoissett or southern Rehoboth. He there took part in the creation of still another town. In 1667, the Plymouth Court, on petition of Willett and others, established the township of Swansey. He was from the first its most prominent man. The court gave him liberty to "purchase what lands he can in behalf of the court, within the township of Swansey, *so as he do not too much straiten*

* *Brodhead*, I., 743.

† *History of New York City*, by Mrs. Martha J. Lamb, I., 231.

the Indians."* The particulars of its incorporation present two curious points. Captain Willett and four others were appointed "to have the trust of admittance of town inhabitants, &c." The conditions of town membership were proposed by Willett, accepted and expounded in a church meeting, and adopted by the town. The first condition was, "that no erroneous person be admitted into the township, either as inhabitant or sojourner." This the church explained to apply only to damnable heresies, of which several are specifically mentioned; or to opinions inconsistent with the well-being of the place, such as denying the divine institution of the Christian Sabbath, or opposing those "civil respects that are usually performed according to the laudable custom of our nation each to other, as bowing the knee or body, &c.;" or to disrespect or non-support of the ministry. The exclusion did not apply to points not necessary to salvation, as pedobaptism, etc. The church's exposition bore hard on Quakers, but not on Baptists. Rev. John Myles, a Baptist clergyman, who had been disciplined at Rehoboth, became the minister of Swansey, and shared with Willett the honor of being its father. A more singular feature in the settlement of Swansey was the division of the inhabitants into three ranks. The division was made, first by the committee of which Willett was chairman, afterward by committees appointed by the town. They were, in fact, censors, with power to promote and to degrade. Their power was re-enforced by subsequent legislation. Those high in rank received more land and paid more tax.†

Captain Willett died on the 4th of August, 1674, less than a year before the outbreak of Philip's War. In that conflict the town he lived in, and with whose beginnings his name is most closely associated, was laid waste by fire, and his son was killed. Like Blaxton, who owned Shawmut, on which Boston was built, and who also was buried within a few miles of Providence, he was spared the distress of witnessing those scenes of destruction. His wife died before him, in January, 1669. Both were buried in a retired spot, in what is known as "Little Neck Burial-ground," near the head of Bullock's Cove, within the present limits of East Providence, Rhode Island. It is a sandy knoll, gleaming with modern marbles, and shaded by hemlocks and oaks. It is often visited, and the epitaphs, rudely cut, and badly "spelt by th' unlettered muse," have been copied. We present tracings from his head-stone and foot-stone.

John Saffin, who married Captain Willett's daughter Martha, and who

* *Plymouth Records*, IV., 176. † Baylies' *Memoirs of Plymouth Colony*, II., 235, etc.

1674.

Here lyes y^e Body
 of y^e nor Thomas
 Cuillelt esq^r who died
 august y^e 4th in y^e 64th
 year of his age anno

WHO WAS THE
 FIRST MAYOR
 OF NEW YORK
 & TWICE DID
 SUSTAIN^TEY PLACE

was fond of writing verses, composed the following "Epitaph" on the "Worshipful Thomas Willett, Esquire:"

"Here lies grand Willett, whose good name
Did mount upon the wings of Fame;
Who into place did not intrude,
When star of the first magnitude;
But 's prudence, piety and zeal
For God, in church and Commonweal,
His real worth and generous spirit,
Which constantly he did inherit,
His hospitality and love,
And courteous carriage like a dove,
Did so excel that all might see
He had attained to the first Three:
Now he's hence gone to his long home,
And taken from the ill to come;
Lived here desired, lamented died,
Is with his Saviour glorified."

Saffin's "Epitaph on that eminent and truly pious matron, Mrs. Mary Willett," expands into ten-syllable verse, and is not always restrained within the limits of that; as appears from the following couplet:

"Yea, Venus, Pallas, Diana, and the Graces
Compared with her should all have lost their places."

We resist the temptation to quote more.

I know no good reason for questioning the Willett pedigree which he quotes, though it is a surprise to find, in the young associate of the Pilgrims at Leyden, a son and grandson of dignitaries in the Church of England.* The dates harmonize, and the names Thomas and Andrew recur among the sons of Captain Thomas Willett. The Rev. Andrew Willett, D.D., was a distinguished writer on church history, scriptural interpretation, and

* The following extract is from the BARTOW GENEALOGY, by the Rev. Evelyn Bartow, page 195. It implies that "Hon. Thomas Willett" was son of Rev. Andrew, and grandson of Rev. Thomas. "X. Rev. Thomas Willet, sub-almoner to Edward VI. He was Rector of Barley, Co. Herts, and Prebend of Ely, Co. Cambridge, d. 1597. His d. Rebecca, born 1558, m. Rev. Edward Francklin, Rector of Kelshull, Herts, and his son, IX. Rev. Andrew Willet, was b. at Ely, 1562, grad. at Cambridge, 1580, ordained Priest, 1584, Proctor of Cambridge College, 1585, and Prebend of Ely Cathedral, 1597. He was also Vicar of Childerby and Grantesdaen, Cambridgeshire, and of Barley, Co. Leicester, Chaplain to Prince Henry, and d. in London, 1621. He m. in 1597, Jane * * *, of Ely, by whom he had (among eleven sons and seven das) 1. Andrew, Vicar of Reed. 2. Rebecca, d. y. 3. Thomas, d. y. 4. Thomas. 5. James. VIII. Hon. Thomas Willet, First Mayor of New York," etc.

"sacred emblems." His books are mentioned as in the possession of Plymouth and Massachusetts worthies. He is said to have been the author of more than forty treatises, the most celebrated being *Synopsis Papismi*, which was considered a severe blow to the papal system. It was a formidable missile, a folio of some thirteen hundred pages, and passed through eight editions.

The descendants of Willett have been numerous. Some settled in the Narragansett country, and are mentioned in Updike's *History of the Narragansett Church*. The most distinguished of the name, Marinus Willett, was conspicuous in the French and Indian and Revolutionary wars, and was also Mayor of New York city. Captain Thomas Willett's daughter Hester married the Rev. Josiah Flynt, of Dorchester, Massachusetts, and was the mother of Henry Flynt, for fifty-five years tutor in Harvard College; also of Dorothy Flynt, who married Edmund Quincy, and was the maternal ancestor of the Quincys, Jacksons, and Wendells of Massachusetts. Dorothy Q., the subject of a poem by Dr. O. W. Holmes, was the great-granddaughter of Thomas Willett, and the great-grandmother of the poet.

Charles W. Parsons.



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